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Moderate the modifiers

Imogen Smith



I RECENTLY attended a Pitching to Publishers session at the Byron Bay Writers Festival. The judges gave great feedback, and their most repeated advice was to cut down on modifiers – adverbs and adjectives.

Using too many modifiers can mean hard work for your reader, and if your manuscript crosses a publisher's desk clogged with modifiers, you could face instant rejection.

Stephen King once said 'the road to hell is paved with adverbs', and our publishers at BBWF certainly thought so, too, but why are modifiers persecuted so? And how do you get your point across without them?

Have you ever played golf and missed a putt? Maybe you've gone round and around the hole putting and putting, but not quite managed to sink the ball.

Adverbs are like those putts that miss. Each time you swing an adverb, you write two, three, four words that circle around the message, but never really hit the mark. One good verb would sink it for you.

The good news is that adverbosity is easier to fix than poor putting technique. Adverbs are easy to spot: they often end in -ly. Awkwardly, tiresomely, sickeningly, lazily, dully and clumsily are just a few examples (and yes, there is a hidden message).

The best news is that they're easy to deal with. Just take your adverb/verb combination, and think of a verb to cover both: 'Jan ran quickly' becomes 'Jan raced'. Or even dashed, sprinted, hurried, galloped or flew.

Where adverbs are despised, adjectives are tolerated. They're necessary to convey nuance and they're less clumsy. Still, you can boost your writing with precise nouns that say it all.

Instead of Dan living in a big house, he could live in a mansion. Or, manor, or palace, or compound, or castle, or chateau, or villa ... Notice that some of these can bring metaphor into your writing.

There's no need to eliminate adverbs or adjectives. Rather, analyse your writing and push deeper into your vocabulary. You'll develop clearer prose and a stronger voice. Now hit the green! ■

Recommended reading

King, Stephen. (2001). *On Writing*. Hodder and Stoughton.
Strunk, W, White, EB & Kalman, M. (2007). *The Elements of Style (Illustrated)*. Penguin.

Got a request?

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